

## Internal Affairs

by Brandon

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> <p>INTERNAL AFFAIRS<p>
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by Brandon D. Ray ([publius@avalon.net](mailto:publius@avalon.net))  
> <br>

MONDAY  
>8:34 a.m.<p>

FBI Assistant Director Walter Skinner was known throughout the Bureau as a meticulous man. He had built this public image over the course of more than two decades of federal law enforcement, and he held the reputation for one simple reason: It was true.

Whether he was coaching his nephew's soccer team, or supervising the most complicated and dangerous of sting operations, he was never willing to settle for half measures. And if he was sometimes a little tough on the people under his supervision, they were willing to accept that, because they all knew that he was even tougher on himself.

Still, that didn't mean that what he was about to do was going to be easy. No one ever promised you that ANYTHING in life would be easy, Walter,>> he reminded himself.

A few moments earlier, his secretary had buzzed to let him know that the two agents he had summoned had arrived. He had told her to have them wait, and had taken these last few minutes to collect his thoughts, and steel himself for what lay ahead. Now he settled himself behind his desk, adjusted the pencil lying next to his blotter so that it was PRECISELY at right angles to the edge of the desk, and pushed the intercom button. "Send them in."

The door opened, and Special Agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder entered the room. As Mulder shut the door, Skinner reflected on the fact that he seemed to spend more "face time" with these two agents than he did with any other four agents in his area. That might have bothered some supervisors, but to Skinner it was just part of the job -- and he knew also that he got more and better work out of these two than out of any other team he had ever had in his employ.

Until recently.

He rocked back in his chair and looked at them for a moment, standing side by side in front of his desk. Normally, there was an almost visible bond tying the two together, and an aura extending outwards that aggressively proclaimed their partnership, keeping all strangers (which meant, in reality, everyone but themselves) at arm's length. This had never bothered Skinner; he had long ago intuited that this was one of the principle reasons why the two were so effective.

But today -- and for the last two weeks -- it was different.

They had returned on a Friday afternoon from an assignment in Vermont. They had successfully concluded the assignment, in their usual unorthodox style, and when Skinner spoke to them briefly that afternoon, they had been tired, but otherwise perfectly normal (at least by their own standards).

The following Monday, however, everything had changed. It had been as if a wall of ice had suddenly appeared between them. They had been civil, correct, professional -- but there was no spark, no energy.

Skinner had assumed at first that they had simply had an argument about something -- hardly a new experience for them -- and that it would blow over in a day or two. But it did not, and before long it had begun to affect their work.

At the heart of it, of course, was the self-evident fact that they were no longer communicating. Normally their ability to sense each other's thoughts and intentions, and to coordinate their activities, bordered on the telepathic. Now, however, they seemed perpetually out of step; the reports they submitted showed at first a certain sloppiness, then a clearly willful lack of cooperation. Going over their paperwork this past Friday evening, Skinner had come to the unhappy conclusion that he would have to intervene, before they slid over into outright negligence.

He cleared his throat. "Agent Scully. Agent Mulder. Thank you for coming. I'm sorry I had to keep you waiting." He looked at the two faces across the desk from him: Hers, as always, would do credit to the Sphinx; surprisingly, his was also completely blank. Normally Mulder's face was a roadmap to his emotions, but not today. He was as

cold and walled-off as his partner.

Skinner cleared his throat again. "As you both know, the Bureau takes no official interest in the personal business of its employees. However, when that personal business intrudes into your official duties, the Bureau must become involved." No reaction. Skinner sighed inwardly. This was going even worse than he had feared. Well, nothing to do but push ahead.

"I believe that we now face such a situation," he continued. "Believe me; I take no pleasure in having called this meeting, and I would rather be doing almost anything else rather than invading your privacy. However, the rapid deterioration of the quality of your work leaves me no alternative." He paused again, not expecting an answer, but because it was only fair to give them, either individually or as a pair, a chance to respond.

To his surprise, it was Scully who spoke. Normally she was the quiet one, and it was Mulder who was outspoken, even verging on more than one occasion on insubordination. The only exception was when she perceived that Mulder was in jeopardy, at which point she came out and fought like a lioness. He remembered one evening when he had found himself looking at the wrong end of her Sig Sauer.... He shook himself, and realized that he hadn't actually been listening to what she was saying.

"I must apologize, Agent Scully; I was distracted by a passing thought. Would you be willing to repeat your comment?" Damn! >> he thought. This is not going well at all. >>

"I said, sir," she replied icily, "that I do not believe it is any business of the Bureau what goes on in... MY... private life. If that is what this meeting is about, I must ask to be excused."

"As I have indicated, Agent Scully --"

She cut him off. "Sir, I do not believe you can find any fault in my conduct. I have been unfailingly correct, professional and courteous. And \*I\* have in no way violated the ethical standards of the Bureau, or of the Department." The slight stress on the word "I" in the last sentence was impossible to miss.

Skinner's eyes flicked over to Mulder. It was not lost on him that Scully was defending only herself, and he was curious to see how her partner was taking it.

Still a complete stoneface... Jesus. This was bad. Skinner drummed his fingers on the desktop and looked at the two agents. He decided on a frontal assault. If he couldn't slide past the wall with reason, perhaps he could batter it down. He winced inwardly at the simile, but didn't see that he had any choice.

"With due respect, Agent Scully, that is not an acceptable response. You are dodging the issue. While your CONDUCT has been beyond reproach, your work product -- your reports, the disposition of your cases, and the like -- has been completely unacceptable. Unacceptable, Agent Scully." He bored in on her, hoping to reestablish the contact he normally had with her. Their relationship paled in comparison to her bond with Mulder, but it was contact. But not today.

"I'm sorry that you feel that way, sir. May I ask why \*I\* am beingsingled out for criticism? I am, after all, only one member of the...TEAM...towhich I have been assigned. If I may say so, sir, this interviewis not up to your usual standard of fairness." Still, her face remainedcold, distant and expressionless.

Again, Skinner sighed. She had a point; he HAD been singling herout. But that was only because she was the first one -- the onlyone, so far -- who had responded. Normally, these interviews werecharacterized by sharp exchanges between himself and Mulder, punctuatedby Scully's intervention on Mulder's behalf. But again, today thescript was different.

"That's a fair point, Agent Scully." He shifted his eyes to Mulderagain. "Agent Mulder, have you got anything to contribute to thisconversation? This is, after all, at least as much your problem asit is Agent Scully's."

"No, sir."

'No, sir' what?>> Skinner wondered. No, he didn't haveanything to contribute, or no, it wasn't his problem? Jesus, he waslosing control of this entire conversation. He had rehearsed it inhismind all weekend, but none of his scenarios had gone like this.

While he didn't understand any better than when they started what theproblem was, one thing was becoming clear: The longer he held themin his office, the more they were each digging in their heels. Hehad to break this up, cut his losses, and give some more thought to thesituation before he tried again. He nodded sharply.

"Very well, Agents. If either of you -- or both of you -- shouldchange your minds, and wish to talk, my door will be open. You aredismissed." And the two agents left, but not together.

# # #

12:47 p.m.

Skinner sat in the cafeteria, pushing his chef's salad around on theplate. He'd spent the morning mulling over the disasterous interviewwith Mulder and Scully, and reached no good conclusions. He'd reviewedhis initial analysis, even read through their reports again, and been reassured,at least, in his own views. His conclusions were correct: there WASa problem, and it had to be addressed. The only question was HOW.

Finally, he shook his head, stood up, and carried his tray to the disposal. This wasn't getting him anywhere, and he had other work to do. Hewouldn't -- couldn't -- wash his hands of Agents Mulder and Scully, butmaybe if he took the afternoon and evening to do his other work, and thinkabout other things, his subconscious would find the clue he was missing.

Maybe they would even solve the problem themselves -- they were goodat solving problems. But he couldn't count on it, and he was determinednot to let his best agents self-destruct like this. It just wasn'tgoing to happen -- not if Walter Skinner had anything to say about it.

# # #

TUESDAY

>1:17 p. m.<p>

Skinner finished reading the report on the Dennison matter, scribbled a few notes in the margin at the bottom, and closed the folder with a sigh. He took off his glasses, closed his eyes and rubbed his nose. Twenty years in this business, and these cases could still get to him sometimes-- especially the ones involving children.

The buzzer on his intercom sounded. Glaring at the device, he punched the talk button. "Skinner."

"Sir, Agent Mulder is here to see you. He doesn't have an appointment, but he is very insistent."

"Send him in," the Assistant Director replied, and switched off the intercom. Hastily, he put his glasses back on, and dropped the Dennison file in his out box. He looked up expectantly, just as Mulder entered the room. The agent closed the door, and crossed the room to stand in front of Skinner's desk.

Not knowing what to expect, hoping for the best, but fearing the worst, Skinner gestured to one of the visitor chairs.

Mulder shook his head. "I won't need that much of your time, sir. I'm here to request a transfer to the VCU."

Skinner stared at the tall, lanky agent in disbelief. MULDER was requesting a transfer away from the X-Files? MULDER? "This-- this comes as quite a surprise, Agent Mulder," he managed to stammer out.

"I realize that, sir. However, I've been thinking about what you said yesterday, and I believe that this is in the best interests both of myself and of the Bureau."

Skinner realized that he was continuing to stare at Mulder. He shook himself and forced himself to look away. His eyes fell again on the visitor's chair. "Please...sit down, Agent Mulder," he said, and waited while the man reluctantly complied.

Skinner contemplated the agent's face for a moment. Mulder was still wearing the same mask as yesterday. Skinner shook his head slightly, and said, "A decision to transfer to another unit is not one to be lightly entered into. You have been doing excellent work in your current assignment, and I would be loathe to see you throw that away."

"I understand that, sir," Mulder responded coolly. "However, in this instance, I think it would be best for...everybody."

Suddenly Skinner was angry. "\*I\* will be the one who decides what is best for 'everybody', Agent Mulder," he snapped, and instantly regretted it.

"Yes, sir," Mulder replied, no change of expression visible on his face. "Forgive me, sir. I was merely expressing my views; I had no

intention to overstep my proper bounds. Sir."

Skinner stared. Normally, by this point in an interview Mulder would be pounding on his desk and yelling. This cold formalism was far more disturbing than any yelling, precisely because it was so totally out of character. If he had had any doubts that something was really, really wrong in that basement office, they were now completely banished. He decided to steer the subject back to the matter at hand. "Agent Mulder, I assume that you are aware that, if you DO transfer to Violent Crimes, it will almost certainly not be possible for you to transfer back to the X-Files at a future date." Come on, Mulder, >> he thought. It's a one-way door, and you know that as well as I do. Don't do this! >>

"I am aware of that, sir," was the only reply.

Skinner drummed his fingers on the desk top, and Mulder sat in the chair staring back at him. All he could think of was to confront the man again -- yet that had not worked yesterday. Maybe if he tried a more conciliatory approach.

"Agent Mulder," he said, and paused. How should he put this? "Agent, Mulder, as I indicated yesterday, I am quite concerned about the...situation as it exists between yourself and Agent Scully." No response. "Your work has been suffering, and I am certain that it can only be a matter of time before the matter is noticed -- and taken up -- by HIGHER AUTHORITIES." He deliberately stressed the last two words, and he was certain that Mulder knew exactly who he was talking about. "I would like to take this opportunity to repeat my offer of yesterday: If there is anything I can do or say which would be helpful, please say so."

The man hesitated, then said firmly, "I don't believe there is anything anyone can do, sir. Other than to accept my request for transfer."

"A referral to the Employee Assistance Program --" Skinner began, but Mulder cut him off.

"With due respect, sir, I would like to decline. We both know that an EAP referral can place a black mark next to an employee's name."

Mulder is worrying about a black mark? >>> Skinner wondered. What's one more spot to a leopard? >>> He shrugged slightly. Well, he'd made the offer. "So is there nothing I can do, Agent Mulder?" Talk to me, Mulder! >>

"Other than to facilitate my transfer, no sir."

Skinner stood staring across the desk at the recalcitrant agent for another moment. Finally, he nodded reluctantly. "Very well, Agent Mulder. I will take your request under consideration. You are dismissed."

Mulder stood up. He started to head for the door, then turned back, and said hesitantly, "When --"

"I said you are dismissed, Agent Mulder!" Skinner snapped. Mulder nodded and left the room.

# # #

3:49 p.m.

Skinner stared across the desk at Agent Scully. "So you are requesting a transfer to Pathology?" he asked. Didn't I just have this conversation a couple of hours ago?>>

"Yes sir."

"May I ask why?"

"I believe I already explained my reasoning, sir. I believe it is in the best interests of the Bureau."

Skinner decided to ignore the statement. He hadn't handled that issue at all well in speaking to Agent Mulder. "I wonder if you fully appreciate the consequences of your request, Agent Scully."

"Sir, I believe I have --"

He raised a hand and cut her off. "Attend me, please. I do not know if you are aware of it, but two hours ago Agent Mulder came to my office and requested a transfer to Violent Crimes." Normally, he would not dream of revealing the contents of a confidential interview with one employee to another employee. This situation, however, seemed to warrant it. "If I transfer you to Pathology, and Agent Mulder to the VCU, the X-Files will be shut down. If that should happen, they will remain shut down. Neither you, nor Agent Mulder, nor anyone else, will be able to reopen them for the foreseeable future."

Scully shrugged slightly. "The X-Files have been an interesting...diversion," she said. "However, I believe that I have long since completed the assignment I was given by Section Chief Blevins. My talents are being wasted on this project, and my career has been sidetracked. At one time I thought that there might be other...compensations. However, I have come to the conclusion that this is not the case. I therefore request transfer. Sir."

As he had with Mulder, Skinner became angry. He whipped off his glasses, and said, "Let's cut the crap, shall we Agent Scully? This isn't about the Bureau, and this isn't about your career, and we both know it. This is about --"

"Sir --"

He overrode her. "This is about you and Agent Mulder. Now, I don't know what happened down there in your little cubbyhole, and frankly, I don't care. It's none of my business, and there is no requirement by the Bureau or by myself that the agents working in this unit be friends."

"But I do expect you to work together -- and to work on your assigned cases. In the past, I have had complete confidence in the ability of the X-Files unit to accept and master any challenge I posed to it, but in the last two weeks my confidence has been badly shaken. I am willing to do anything in my power to see that confidence restored. What I am NOT willing to do is see the most successful team

it has ever been my pleasure to supervise broken up by some irrelevant triviality."

As soon as the words cleared his lips, he knew he had made a mistake. Agent Scully rose from her chair, her entire body trembling with anger. "Sir," she said, in a slightly strangled voice, "may I have permission to speak freely?"

"Go ahead," he said, dreading what he knew was about to come. But you brought it on yourself, didn't you, Walter?>>

"Sir," the agent said, barely controlled fury hovering around the edges of her words. "I do not believe that I deserved to be subjected to that, that tirade. I have made a legitimate and reasonable request. I have spent FIVE YEARS of my life working on this project, and I have done the very best I could. That far exceeds any reasonable commitment which could be construed from my original acceptance of the assignment given me by Section Chief Blevins. I now feel that I have done all that I can with this project, and I wish to be transferred, immediately, to another unit, where I can put my talents to better use. I have nothing further to contribute, either to the X-Files or, for that matter, to this conversation." And she turned and stalked out of the room.

# # #

THURSDAY

>11:03 a.m.<p>

Two days had passed. During that time, Skinner had surreptitiously observed the two agents of the X-Files unit as they moved about the building performing their duties. Once he had even gone to their office, but found the almost palpable aura of hostility -- both between the two agents and also directed at him -- to be overwhelming. Lacking a really good reason for being there, he had beat a hasty retreat.

Nothing seemed to be changing -- at least, not for the better. And if Skinner knew anything about human psychology, that was a very bad sign. It meant, in all probability, that the battle lines had been drawn, and the two of them were sitting there brooding, each reinforcing his or her own self-justifications for whatever it was that was upsetting them.

Maybe I should just approve their transfer requests and be done with it,>> he thought. They each say that's what they want; maybe I should just do it.>> He eyed the telephone. All it would take would be two brief phone calls -- and he knew that "higher authorities" would take the ball and run with it.

Except that that wasn't Walter Skinner's way. You can't run away from this, Walter,>> he thought. That's not why they pay you the big bucks.>>

Sighing, he reached out and touched the intercom button. "Please ask Agents Mulder and Scully to come to my office." He didn't know what he was going to say to them, but he had to try something.

It took them less than three minutes to arrive. Skinner sat in his swivel chair as they walked across the room and stood in front of

his desk, just as they had on Monday. "Please be seated, Agents," he said. After a moment's hesitation, they both sat down.

"Thank you for coming so promptly," he said. "I know that you have a heavy workload, and I appreciate the fact that you were able to break away."

"Did we have a choice?"

"I believe we always have choices, Agent Scully." He held up his hand to forestall any response. "Sorry; I didn't ask you up here to debate philosophy." He took a deep breath. Here goes nothing.>> "But I think you both know why I DID call you up here. So how about it? What gives?" He tried to make his voice light and genial.

For the first time in nearly three weeks, Skinner saw the two agents actually look at each other. It was just the briefest glance, but it was there.

He decided to press his advantage, as small as it might be. "Agents," he said, looking first at one, then at the other. "I am utterly, completely serious. This situation cannot be permitted to continue." Again he raised his hand in order to hold the floor. "As I said previously, I have no desire -- none -- to interfere in your private lives. By the same token, however, your private lives cannot be permitted to interfere with the Bureau's business, either.

"I am asking you, therefore, in my official capacity as your supervisor, to try to find some way to resolve this unpleasantness. Otherwise, I will have no choice but to approve your transfer requests. And I can't believe either one of you really wants that."

He looked from Mulder to Scully and back to Mulder. She was still playing Sphinx, and Mulder was doing his best to emulate her. Skinner sighed, and went on, "In the interest of trying to settle the matter on the best possible terms, I would like to offer you the use of my office, as a sort of 'neutral territory', a place where you can talk things out. I can stay in the room as a sort of referee -- or I can leave the two of you alone to work it out in private."

Again, Skinner looked from one to the other, trying to gauge their reactions, but as far as he could tell, there was none.

At last, Mulder said, "Sir, may I be excused?"

Skinner sighed. He'd been doing that a lot this week. "Very well, Agent Mulder. If that is your wish." As the other man rose from his chair and walked towards the door, the Assistant Director turned his gaze to Agent Scully.

"Agent Scully?" he asked, raising his eyebrows slightly.

She hesitated just the briefest of moments, then said firmly, "I don't think I have anything I wish to say to... anyone. Sir."

"Then you are also excused," he replied.

"Thank you, sir." And she also rose and left.

# # #

FRIDAY

>12:58 p.m.<p>

Skinner left the cafeteria holding two cups of coffee: one black, the other two sugars, no cream. He took the elevator back to his floor, but instead of going to his office, he stopped at the conference room down the hall, and pushed the door open with his elbow.

Agent Scully was already waiting for him. He had decided after yesterday's fiasco that he had to make one last attempt to get through the barrier, and it hadn't really been hard for him to conclude that his best chance lay with Dana Scully. Although he was close to both of the agents, his relationship with her was particularly... "intimate" was not quite the right word. "Significant", perhaps.

But whatever the correct phrasing was, he knew that if he could just get past the mysterious barrier she had erected between herself and the rest of the world, he would be able to reestablish contact with her. Of course, if he failed...

He pushed the thought from his mind. Failure is not an option!>> he thought, quoting a line from one of his favorite movies.

Unfortunately, this was not a movie.

He quickly crossed the room to where she sat waiting at the conference table, and placed the sweetened cup of coffee in front of her. She looked up at him with dead, opaque eyes as he took the seat next to her and set his own cup down next to hers, then turned to face her. There's so much pain in there,>> he thought, and wished desperately that he didn't have to be doing this. But the boil had to be lanced, for her own sake if for no other reason. Otherwise she'd never get whatever poison it was out of her system. He just hoped it wasn't too late to do her any good.

"Agent Scully," he said, then stopped. No, that was wrong. Try again. "Dana." He saw her eyes widen ever so slightly at this use of her first name. "I want to start by apologizing for the scene in my office Tuesday afternoon." Take it slow, Walter; take it easy. You've got her attention, don't blow it!>>

"Sir, it is not necessary --"

"\*I\* think it is necessary," he said, cutting her off. "I am trying to do my job, and my... professional concerns were and are legitimate. But during that conversation I stepped over the line; I went too far."

He paused to let her think about that for a moment. Come on,>> he thought. Let me in. Talk to Uncle Walter.>>

Finally, she nodded. "Okay," she said. And Skinner rejoiced at the first, tentative sign of a thaw. "Okay, so you've apologized. Is that all?"

Skinner shook his head, and said, "No." And he waited.

She looked at him for a moment or two, then seemed for the first time to notice the coffee he'd brought her. She picked it up and took a cautious sip. "Nice," she said. "No cream, two sugars. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Another long silence. At last, she said, "I guess I don't understand where this conversation is going. You have already addressed the issue, both with myself and with...." She let the sentence trail off and gestured vaguely with her hands. Then she continued, "You have said you don't want to pry into my personal life, and you have even apologized for having done so. On the other hand, you haven't acted on...the transfer requests." Again, Skinner rejoiced; she was no longer speaking ENTIRELY of herself, even if the references to Mulder were pretty damned oblique. "At least, so far as I know you have not." She looked at him questioningly.

Skinner shook his head again. "No, Agent Scully," he replied. "I have not acted upon the transfers requested by yourself and Agent Mulder. However, I think we both understand that I cannot sit on them indefinitely." She nodded slowly. "As to where this conversation is going..." He stopped and thought about it, and then said the only thing that Walter Skinner could say: "That's entirely up to you, Dana."

Her eyes flew to his at the second use of her personal name. "I see," she said. "And suppose I decide to just get up and leave?"

Skinner gestured at the door. "You know the way," he said, and on an inspiration added, in the lightest possible tones, "Don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out."

Involuntarily, she gave a half chuckle. "You sounded just like --" And then she stopped, and her face shut down completely. Her body language, which had been gradually becoming more open, turned cramped and hunched over, and for a few vital, eternal seconds, she didn't breathe at all, and neither did Skinner.

And then Dana Scully started to cry.

Skinner blinked in astonishment. Jesus! >> he thought. I didn't expect THIS! Now what??>>

He sat watching, helplessly, as great wracking sobs coursed through her body. Her shoulders heaved, and her hands sat limp and useless in her lap, while tears leaked out from behind eyelids that were squinched tightly shut.

Skinner had seen employees cry before -- any supervisor had. But usually he had at least an intellectual understanding of what was causing the upset, and this time he didn't have a clue, beyond the fact that it obviously concerned her relationship with her partner.

Tentatively, he reached out a hand and gently touched her shoulder, but she knocked it away. And so he just sat there, helpless, and watched her weep.

Finally, she started to wind down. The sobs gave way to sniffles, and she felt around in the pockets of her suit jacket until she found a Kleenex, and she blew her nose into it loudly.

"That was quite a performance, Agent Scully," he commented at last, cautiously.

She laughed slightly, reassuring him. "I guess it was. I'll bet you didn't know I had it in me."

"I am constantly surprised at the range and versatility of the agents in my employ," he intoned solemnly, and was inwardly delighted to hear her laugh again, a little bit stronger this time.

"Bet you got more than you bargained for in my case," she replied, and finally was able to meet his eyes. "Sorry...Walter," she said.

"No need to apologize, Agent Scully," he said, instinctively putting on his business hat again. "We all have our individual strengths and weaknesses, and occasionally we all need a chance to...blow off steam."

"Yes, sir." She rose from her seat. "May I be excused, sir? I feel I should be getting back to work."

"Certainly, Agent Scully. I have no desire to keep you from your work."

# # #

FRIDAY  
>10:13 p.m.<p>

Walter Skinner wearily closed the folder he was working on and placed it in his out box. One more to go,>> he thought. Then I can go home.>>

It had been a long afternoon and evening. He had returned to his office after the interview with Dana Scully completely drained of energy, as if HE were the one who had had the emotional breakdown. Then he had waited anxiously in his office, hoping against hope for a visit or a phone call that would tell him that everything was going to be okay.

But it hadn't come, and as the hour grew late and darkness settled over the nation's capital, he had resigned himself to the knowledge that it wasn't going to come.

He sighed deeply. No one could say he hadn't tried -- but that wasn't doing his conscience one damned bit of good at the moment. Shaking his head, he reached for the last folder, and tried to put the matter out of his mind.

Hmm. This item was going to need some followup on the ground, and it looked like the Salt Lake City office had blown its wad. In fact, he realized, reading further, the SAC was basically dumping it on him. With a growl of annoyance he considered whether the matter could be held over until Monday. Better not, he decided; events were developing awfully fast on this one.

Instinctively, he knew who he wanted to send, but that pretty clearly wasn't going to work -- not both of them, at any rate. He shrugged. So he wouldn't send both of them. This was more up Mulder's alley, anyway -- might as well get some use out of him before losing him to the VCU. And maybe he could expedite Scully's transfer while Mulder was away, so she'd be gone by the time he got back. A nice, clean break, like ripping a bandaid off.

Or putting a bullet in the back of someone's head.

He thought about calling Mulder, but the Assistant Director always preferred to deliver assignments to his agents in person. He'd stop down to the basement office on his way out, on the chance that Mulder was working late; if he was not, well, the agent's apartment wasn't that far off the route Skinner usually took to get home.

Gathering up a few items he wanted to work on over the weekend and stuffing them into his briefcase, Skinner switched off the lights and left his office. The rest of that floor of the building was dark and silent, except for one janitor emptying wastebaskets in the conference room that Skinner and Scully had sat in more than nine hours before.

Waiting for the elevator, Skinner wondered if there was anything else he could have done for Mulder and Scully. He reviewed the events of the past three weeks in his mind and concluded that there really wasn't. He'd made mistakes, yes, but he'd done the best he could. That didn't make it hurt any less, though. The elevator arrived, and he got onboard and pushed the button for the basement.

As he walked down the familiar basement hallway, Skinner saw that their office door was standing open, indicating that Mulder was probably still inside, or at least nearby. The lights were out, but that proved nothing. Skinner was of the long-standing opinion and belief that Agent Mulder had been raised in a cave. The Assistant Director stepped up to the threshold and started to go inside.

He almost tripped over something lying in the doorway. Looking down, he saw with surprise that it was Dana Scully's coat and purse, lying in a crumpled heap on the floor. Glancing up again, he was even more startled -- and appalled -- to see her computer monitor lying against the side wall, shards of broken glass and plastic scattered hither and yon. Things must really have gone to hell down here, >> he thought with a sinking feeling in his gut. And it's at least partially my fault, because I goaded her into it this afternoon. 'Lancing a boil' my ass! >>

He almost turned to go, but then he shook his head. He was going to have to face this sooner or later; he also still had this case to dispose of, and Mulder was still the right agent for the job. Sighing, he shifted his gaze to the two desks the agents had somehow squeezed into a room which was really too small even for one. Sure enough, Mulder was here: He was sitting in his chair, his back to the door. Skinner thought about turning on the light, but decided against it. It's still his office, after all, at least for a few more days. >>

He was about to speak when he noticed that Mulder wasn't alone. He blinked in surprise, and squinted into the gloom, trying to make

out what was going on.

Jesus! Is she sitting on his lap??>> He took a careful, quiet step forward and craned his neck, trying to see, and was rewarded by a flash of red hair. She is!!>>

Skinner was dumbfounded, and as he stood there, paralyzed with surprise, he heard voices. Their voices.

"I'm sorry, Scully," Mulder was saying. "I should never have tried to kiss you that day."

"No, Mulder," she replied. "You were fine. I wanted you to kiss me. I've wanted you to kiss me for a long time. I shouldn't have run away; I should have been prepared for it. And when I did run away, I should have come back sooner, instead of waiting like I did and putting us both through three weeks of hell. I was scared, though. I'm still a little scared. This is a big step for us."

"You don't have to be scared, Scully. Not ever again. I'm here. I'll always be here. I'll protect you."

"You always have, Mulder," she replied softly, and Skinner saw her arms snake up around Mulder's neck as she pulled his face down to hers.

I have got to get out of here,>> Skinner thought. I don't dare let them catch me standing here. Agent Scully might actually pull the trigger this time.>> Quickly but quietly, he backed out of the darkened room, and took the elevator back up to his office. He switched on the lights and sat back down at his desk and thought for a minute. Then he picked up his phone and dialed Mulder's extension.

It took them eight rings to answer it. "Fox Mulder." The man's voice sounded hoarse, and as if he were a little dazed. Skinner didn't blame him; Mulder had had a rough week -- and, to all appearances, he had also just had the shock of his life.

"Agent Mulder," he said. "This is the Assistant Director. I'm glad I caught you before you left for the weekend." Was that giggling he heard in the background? No, couldn't be -- not Dana Scully!

Skinner cleared his throat, and went on, "I know that this is short notice, and I also realize that it's been a hard week --" THAT'S the understatement of the year.>> "-- but something has come up, and I need to get someone to Salt Lake City, fast. Do you think you and Agent Scully might be available?"

There was a moment of silence at the other end. Then Mulder said, "The X-Files unit is always ready, willing and able, sir. Uh, you don't need to worry about notifying Scully; I'll...give her a call."

This time Skinner was certain he heard giggling. This was going to take some getting used to, assuming it turned out to be permanent. Shaking his head, a slight smile on his lips, he replied in his best Assistant Director voice, "Very well, Agent Mulder; I'll leave that matter in your capable hands." Skinner smirked at his own private witticism. "And I'll leave the case file on my secretary's desk. You can pick it up at your convenience. I'll expect both of you to be on

the firstflight out tomorrow morning. Good bye." And he hung up thephone, and rubbed his hands together in gleeful pleasure.

The A Team is back in business!>>

# # #

TUESDAY

>11:21 a.m.<br>Epilogue

The Assistant Director finished reading a case file and leaned back in his chair and checked his watch. According to their last phone report, Agents Mulder and Scully should have arrived back in Washington late last night. So far this morning, however, he hadn't heard so much as a peep from their basement office, and his curiosity was driving him crazy.

Finally deciding to indulge himself, Skinner left his own office and took the elevator to the basement. Their office door was standing open, as it had been on Friday night. He approached it cautiously, and peered inside, but this time no one was there. Skinner stepped inside.

Glancing around the room, he saw that the damaged computer monitor had been taken away, and a new one had been installed on Agent Scully's desk. Fast work by IRM, >> he thought. I'll have to give their chief a call and thank him -- especially since he accepted my story of "accidental damage" so easily. >>

Everything else seemed to be the same as always: The same "I Want to Believe" poster on the wall; the same ancient filing cabinets holding five decades of reports on the strange, the bizarre and the unexplained; the same random bits of kitch scattered about the room on every available flat surface.

No, there WAS something new -- two somethings, in fact. With a faint smile, the Assistant Director moved over to their desks, and looked down: On hers was a vase holding a single long-stemmed rose; on his was a small, brown, stuffed bear. A bright red ribbon was looped around the bear's neck, and hanging on the ribbon was a plain white index card with the word "Spooky" written on it in familiar feminine handwriting.

"Can we help you, sir?"

Turning around, Skinner saw Agents Mulder and Scully standing in the doorway. She stood slightly in front of him, wearing her usual Sphinx-like expression, while Mulder was...well, Mulder. And unless the Assistant Director's eyes were deceiving him, she was leaning back against her partner's body, ever so slightly.

"Nothing important, Agent Mulder," he replied easily. "I just wanted to stop by and congratulate both of you on the successful completion of your assignment in Utah."

"Thank you, sir," Mulder replied in what he doubtless believed was a bland tone of voice. As he spoke, Scully moved away from him and walked over to the coat tree to hang up her jacket, and Mulder's eyes followed her every step of the way.

"Not at all, Agent Mulder," he replied. "When my people do a good job, they deserve recognition." He paused, then added, "I, uh, take it that there are no...loose ends that still need to be tied up?"

"Loose ends, sir?" the Sphinx asked, looking at him guilelessly as she walked back to stand next to her partner again, her hip bumping against this upper thigh with studied carelessness. Mulder's hand twitched, but he did not QUITE reach out to touch her. "You mean loose ends concerning our assignment?" she continued.

"Of course I mean concerning your assignment, Agent Scully," the Assistant Director said, putting a note of annoyance in his voice. "What other loose ends would I be asking you about?"

"I don't know, sir," she replied. "I'm certainly not aware of any loose ends of any kind." She glanced up at her partner. "Agent Mulder, are you aware of any loose ends?"

Mulder shook his head, a shit-eating grin on his face. "No loose ends here, Agent Scully."

She turned back to Skinner again. "There are no loose ends, sir," she stated calmly.

"That's very gratifying to hear, Agent Scully."

"There was one thing we did want to ask you about, though, sir," she went on. "Over the past three weeks or so, Agent Mulder and I have been rather...preoccupied, and we're afraid we may not have done our best possible work on some of the cases which were assigned to us during that timeframe. We were wondering if it would be possible for us to take another look at a few items, and perhaps tidy up a bit."

"I think that would be very appropriate, Agent Scully," he said, trying to sound stern. "I'll have the case files sent back down immediately. Quite frankly, I had been meaning to speak to both of you concerning the quality of your recent work. It's a credit to you both that you have identified the problem and are taking corrective action on your own."

"Thank you, sir," she said.

"Of course," Skinner went on, "I have no idea what the nature of this 'preoccupation' was, but I am pleased to see that the situation has apparently been resolved."

"Thank you, sir," the Sphinx repeated.

Skinner suddenly felt very uncomfortable. "Well," he said, looking at his watch, "look at the time. I have to get back to my desk. I'll have those case files sent down right away." Mulder and Scully got out of the way as he moved towards the doorway. On the threshold, he turned to face them again. "On, and Agents -- a word of advice. Keep this door closed when you're working on confidential materials. There's no telling who might be walking by in this hallway, especially after hours."

And with a jaunty stride and a shit-eating grin of his own, Assistant Director Skinner turned and walked out of the room, content

in the knowledge that another job had been well done.  
> <p>

Fini

End  
file.